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A SABBATICAL ODYSSEY, or HAVE WHEELED LUGGAGE--WILL TRAVEL

By Bonnie Anne Osif



What is over sixteen thousand miles, thirteen planes, twenty-one trains, thirteen buses, six trams, seven subways, one ship and nine cars, six months long, many new friends, ten countries and a wealth of new knowledge? The general answer is the opportunity of a lifetime.

The specific answer is a six-month sabbatical to Europe granted to the author by The Pennsylvania State University and supported by Federal Highways and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials during the second half of 1998.

The sabbatical request proposed a study of transportation information use at European transportation centers. Specific areas of interest were local collections, use of interlibrary loan, publication and dissemination of locally produced research, language skills, and Web sites and usage. The second focus was on actual information use as evidenced by an analysis of citations from a random sample of locally produced reports. Detailed analysis of the study is in progress and will be submitted to appropriate journals at a later date. Hopefully this study will be useful to librarians and the community of transportation researchers. That, after all, is the official reason for the sabbatical.

From a professional perspective, a sabbatical allows the researcher to leave daily tasks and look at librarianship from a different perspective. Reference questions are now self-generated. What do I want to investigate? What research parameters do I set and how do I propose to solve the problems? The sky can be

the limit. Structuring the research and the day is at the discretion of the librarian. This is an interesting change since so many of our days and duties are defined by tasks and deadlines for others.

Seeing how others do their job brings new insights, information, and innovations. These can be brought home and incorporated in our own work environment. At the very least, these insights give us a clearer understanding of the constraints, pressures and realities confronting our colleagues..

However, the greatest benefit of the leave is not quantifiable in the number of citations to U.S. DOT reports or how many institutions have full-text Web sites. The greatest benefits were highly qualitative and will last far longer than a particular Web site's usefulness or the publication lists that I carried home.

The Intangible Benefits

The most important benefit was gaining new colleagues and friends. Over the course of the study I interviewed twenty-four individuals: librarians, documentation specialists, computer specialists, engineers and managers. Without exception they were open, helpful and friendly. We spent hours together in the libraries. Each interview took between two and six hours. Then there were tours, introductions to additional personnel, computer demonstrations and interesting exchanges of information and opinions. We shared meals while we discussed problems, solutions and work stories. They provided travel information and recommended sights and restaurants. Some went far beyond the call of professional courtesy.

My hosts in Brno, Czech Republic took me to a restaurant specializing in the local cuisine - which is beyond excellent! Then they took me on a scenic drive through the city to the countryside

and a tour of a breath-taking castle. After donning felt slippers to protect the exquisite wood floors, we toured the building with thoughtful translation along the way. I was the only English speaker and there were several other languages represented in the group yet I was always kept informed of the commentary. The trip back to the hotel was through breathtaking vistas that I can still picture. It is a day and people that I will never forget.

In Finland I met my host on a Sunday afternoon for a tour of the newly-reopened botanical center in Helsinki, then coffee, cake and wonderful hours of conversations. The next day Finnish Road Administration planned a lunch with an administrator and engineers which gave me additional insight. The evening was shared in a pub with colleagues from Iceland.

After a rather grueling trip I arrived in Lausanne, Switzerland. When I checked into my hotel I had a dinner invitation waiting me from the librarian I was to interview. The meal was delicious and the company even better. After spending almost three weeks "on the road" it was nice to relax in a home, have a home cooked meal, drink tea and talk. I left with some English magazines to supplement my dwindling supply of reading materials and a friend I hope to keep in touch with.

Lithuania was added to my list of countries rather late since my initial contact had moved. Unlike my other visits the transportation center was not in the town with the airport and there was no easy public transportation. But this caused no difficulty because the center sent a driver and car for me. I actually walked out of the baggage claim area to find the technology transfer officer holding a sign with my name on it. I learned much about the country and the center I was to visit on the ride to Kaunas and had an interesting tour of a library and center in a country developing after years as a satellite of the former Soviet Union. The open, honest insight of my contact was invaluable.

Last instance was on my third day of my second trip. I was alone on this trip. I was tired and feeling a touch of homesickness. As I walked to the Swedish National Road Administration I noted that I would need to take a picture of the

facility. It was very attractive with the Swedish flags flying against a blue sky. Then I saw an American flag and had to smile. Thinking there must be some reason in history for flying the US flag on that day, I checked in at the reception desk and had a full day of information with some of the most dynamic, interesting, innovative and friendly colleagues I have yet come in contact with. The day flew by and as I prepared to leave for yet another train I was asked if I had seen the US flag. Then I was told it was flying for me! It had been raised to welcome me on my visit, the first US librarian to visit the facility. The picture is a special one in my memory book.

This isn't anywhere near the total number of special people and special times I encountered on the trip. I have a story for each center visited, for almost all the people in the centers and the towns I visited. The sum was so much more than the separate parts. People were the most important part of the trip. They shared their expertise, their successes and their challenges. They shared their time and their friendship. They shared their plans for their libraries. Many shared their hopes and concerns for their countries in these times of change.

And, like Blanche DuBois, I did depend on the kindness of strangers. Even with my phrase book and a smattering of language skills I needed advice and directions from many people and with only one exception those strangers were helpful and friendly.

Mind Expanding

Travel is wonderful. If possible, I would be the traveling librarian. Give me a passport, wheeled luggage, a phrase book and either a guidebook or a little time on the Web and I'm off! But, even a person with my wanderlust misses home and family and puppy. The outreach of my colleagues was thoughtful and made my travels enjoyable and lessened my homesickness. For that I am truly grateful.

Research may have been the official purpose, but people were the keystone of the trip and eye openers were on the daily agenda. The world is not just like us, but wonderfully, amazingly

varied. I was reminded time and again how much we simply take for granted.

Now, the first thing that would cross my mind with that last sentence is our technology and wealth of resources. Or maybe the freedom of communication and sharing of information. After all, we have OCLC for interlibrary loans. We all have E-mail, fax, phones, and the Web. We're so advanced, so connected. Yes, we do take that for granted, don't we?

True, I have all of those resources, but so do many of our international colleagues. In some cases as much or more than we have. No, what we tend to take for granted is that everyone does it like us - or should! Sometime it is a major library issue; other times I found myself caught in a "mindset" on a minor issue and I had to revise my thinking. And my typing!

A simple example: Helga Trantes at Federal Highway Research Institute (BAST) in Germany kindly let me use a computer to contact my family through email. I was happily typing a letter to my husband extolling the wonders of the Koln Cathedral and German cuisine when I happened to look at my text. Now, I am only an average typist but I don't make that many mistakes! Well, I was writing in a different language and it wasn't English and it wasn't German. Looking at my renegade fingers I discovered the keyboard was different from my U.S. model. Of course it was! Different letters have different frequencies and combinations in German than in English, and the keyboard logically should be different. I just never thought to look! And there were some keys with many characters that it took some time for me to figure out how to get the character I wanted on to the screen. Sounds minor? Well, one was the @ sign and that is a very important character for E-mail!

Another wonderful observation was the pride of homeland I found in the people I visited. Not a negative, 'we're better than you are' attitude, but an open willingness to share their customs, food, history, culture and beauty with an interested outsider. I found art works I absolutely love in Finland (I had never thought about Finnish art before), ate Lithuanian food that makes me long

for the time I can return, bought woolens from women at an ancient stone wall in Estonia, and watched in wonder as their fingers moved like quicksilver in the cold creating intricate patterns without a guide. I saw the "Banana Artist" put up a work in Koln and later saw a piece about him on CNN. I had the pleasure of watching several US shows in various native languages, watching MacGyver do his daring-do in English on Norwegian television while in Belgium and watched some of the local productions whenever I could. I saw Mozart in Prague in a building itself worth the price of admission. I worshipped in a myriad of churches in different languages but was made to feel at home in all of them.

A Change of Perspective

Have we ever considered what the separation of a country would do to their national libraries? Our colleagues in the former Czechoslovakia had to when special collections stayed in one part of their divided country. Now they have the challenge of rebuilding their collections. Or what about a country that reunites after decades apart? The two Germanys had various standards and procedures and now they are in the process of coordinating these differences. I had to really re-evaluate my warp speed drive to do as much as possible on the Web after several interviews with my European colleagues. I love the Web and have several sites. Even my credit instruction class has the entire course, including my textbook and extra readings, on the Web. I couldn't think why anyone wouldn't want to become completely "Web-erized." Well, not everyone is quite as Web obsessed as many Americans. Many have been more cautious users and creators - not backward, but wary, evaluative consumers. A good trait, overall.

Freedom of information created some very interesting conversations. U.S. institutions are putting more materials on the Web full text. One area of interest in the study was the use of the virtual National Transportation Library from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. Many reports and databases are being mounted full text for all to use. In contrast, many of our European

counterparts must think of themselves as cost recovery, if not money generating units. This precludes free Web access to their materials. Several lively debates ensued with no opinions changed in the process! But I learned a great deal of respect for my colleagues that have that additional challenge integral to their job.

This leads to another interesting observation. Many of our SLA colleagues are in corporate and institutional settings and must be concerned with justifying their existence. As an academic librarian this is not a topic that is of major personal concern. However, I heard in many settings that this is a major issue. Libraries and librarians are marketing their skills, resources and products and must be sure the administration can recognize the value of their information and services.

One last professional observation was the reinforcement of the idea that there is not necessarily one right way to do something. I wrote in my observation list in my travel diary that there is not a right way but our way. And almost everyone has their way. Catalogs and cataloging rules will vary, interlibrary loan systems and databases are different, but they still accomplish their purpose. Many of my questions asked about systems we assume are utilized by the world. The answers made me see how narrowly focused I was when I wrote the survey. Adaptation is wonderful and expands our horizons!

Several things that a sabbatical is not. It is not restful. It is not a vacation. And it is not, at least when done my way, an excuse to lose weight. I would have thought dragging a suitcase and heavy shoulder bag with my study throughout Europe would have been phenomenally healthy. The study notes never left my side during the travel days. Well, I could tote that bag with the best of them, walked for hours every day and climbed more steps than I thought existed. However, I found some absolutely wonderful food at the most interesting locations, and I had to sample it! After all, when might I be back in Tallin, Estonia, or Borlange, Sweden?

And at the risk of losing my citizenship in Pennsylvania, the home of Hershey's chocolate, the

chocolate in Europe is unbelievable. It should be the fifth major food group. I expected to love Swiss chocolate, heard that German and Belgium chocolates were heavenly and already knew I loved Dutch chocolate. But when I tried Finnish chocolate, it was heaven on earth. My major souvenirs were a collection of European chocolates, and we had a taste test when I returned. Ah, the memories! Ah, the calories!

But Seriously

Did I have a good time on my sabbatical? Indefatigably no! I had an absolutely marvelous time. I have memories of castles, cathedrals, museums and mountain vistas that I hope I never forget. I will remember conversations with perfect strangers and interviews with my colleagues. I gained a greater respect and appreciation for other cultures, yet returned home very happy to see the Statue of Liberty and walk out into the sun at Newark Airport.

I learned many things about information, libraries, computers, publishing, transportation information and transportation systems. I have already completed enough of the citation analysis to realize we must consider a serious, organized collection of international materials. The next step will be a system to translate since we don't have the language skills evidenced by the vast majority of Europeans I met. As the transportation community demands the best materials concerning the best practice regardless of country of origin there will be an increased demand for more complete indexing, more rapid access and seamless translation. Economics and competition will demand it. This sabbatical was a small part in this larger area of study. Hopefully, this will encourage others to take the chance to explore - explore information, explore other ways of doing things and discover new friends/insights along the way.

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